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Proactive Rhetoric

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The American welfare state is coming apart. In The Rhetoric of Reaction, Albert O. Hirschman explained how conservatives had used three themes to counter liberal expansion of social and economic rights: perversity, futility, and jeopardy. This essay expands Hirschman's formulation retrospectively by identifying the liberal antecedents—adequacy, equality, and regulation—that prompted the recent conservative assault on the American welfare state. Further, the author presents three themes to thwart the conservative critique of welfare—mobility, empowerment, and restructuring. As illustrative of "proactive rhetoric", these themes are proposed to guide future social policy in the United States.

The American welfare state is slowly coming apart. Conservative influences in social policy during the past decade have effectively banished the liberal dream of replicating the northern European welfare state in the United States. In place of incremental progress in protecting citizens against insecurities associated with industrialization and capitalism, Americans have witnessed a bipartisan effort to alter fundamentally, if not retract outright the legislation that has served as the foundation for the nation's social policy for more than a half-century. Instead of adding benchmarks to the expansion of the welfare state, liberals have been reduced to defending the very social programs that have been the bedrock of contemporary social progress. The evidence is irrefutable. In 1989, Congress repealed Catastrophic Health Insurance, the first retraction of a social insurance program in the history of the American welfare state. During the first term of the Clinton presidency, the Health Security Act was soundly defeated. In 1996, President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, capping the expenditures for Aid

to Families with Dependent Children, devolving the program to the states, and setting time-limits on receipt of aid, the most radical change in welfare policy since the War on Poverty. Striking at the heart of the welfare state, a bipartisan panel presented three options for salvaging Social Security, each of which called for partial privatization of the program.

That this has come to pass is more a testament to the choreography of public sentiment than it is an inherent cynicism of Americans toward the needy. Indeed, as far back as the late 1970s, the President of the American Enterprise Institute had pledged to alter public philosophy so that it was more congruent with conservative precepts. During the 1980s, policy institutes from the ideological right—the Heritage Foundation, the Manhattan Institute, and the Hoover Institution—planned and executed a series of maneuvers that succeeded in reversing liberal hegemony in social policy. By the end of the decade, liberals were faced with a paradox: although Americans tended to support social welfare programs (Cook and Barrett, 1992), conservatives were defining the debate on the future of social policy. How had conservatives become so masterful at employing rhetoric in order to put public opinion to ideological service? What could this indicate for future directions in social policy?

In 1991, Albert O. Hirschman addressed such questions in *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy*. Having served on the Ford Foundation's project on the future of the American welfare state, Hirschman was provoked to consider the quite profound impact of the relatively flimsy critiques of American social welfare programs which had been advanced by conservatives. In this prescient—if self-congratulatory—book, Hirschman drew on T. H. Marshall's three stages of citizenship—civil, political, and social and economic—to assess the inordinate difficulty encountered by liberals in advancing the American welfare state into the third stage. Using historical material, Hirschman proposed that earlier progress in citizenship—attaining and defending civil and political rights—had also encountered adversity. Moreover, Hirschman concluded that conservative arguments against progressive change could be organized around three theses: perversity, futility, jeopardy. What made Hirschman's work precocious

was his observation that these very theses characterize much of the current, conservative assault on the American welfare state.

By now the critique of the welfare state trumpeted from the political Right has a familiar ring: Rather than alleviating deprivation, welfare programs worsen dependency and contribute to a malignant underclass (it is perverse). Rather than ameliorate conditions of the poor, poverty persists despite the hundreds of billions of dollars spent on social welfare (it is futile). Rather than advance social and economic rights of the disadvantaged, social programs require the elaboration of the state, the expansion of which attenuates freedom and prosperity for all (it is jeopardy). Such arguments are not novel, contends Hirschman; they surface regularly when conservatives wish to sabotage progress.

Although he was able to identify some of sources of regressive rhetoric, such as Charles Murray (1984), Hirschman's work is incomplete. In part, this is a result of his omitting other conservative seers, such as Peter Berger and Marvin Olasky, and the intellectual organizations that have promoted conservative philosophy during the past two decades, such as the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation. In part, it is because the book appeared before Bill Clinton's election to the presidency, the failure of the administration's Health Security Act, the 1994 Republican electoral triumph that was underscored in subsequent Congressional elections, and the welfare reform legislation signed into law in 1996—events that further propelled conservatism in America. The purpose of this essay is to expand Hirschman's outline on conservative theses advanced against the welfare state in order to identify its liberal antecedents, as well as propose a set of theses that could serve to direct future social policy.

The Liberal Antecedents of Reactionary Rhetoric

In aiming at social programs, conservatives put liberalism squarely in their sights. Two decades of sniping have clarified the specific theses that conservatives have targeted as well as the liberal counterattack. The success that conservatives have enjoyed in shaping public philosophy can be attributed to their construction and maintenance of a network of policy institutes

that has put up an incessant assault on liberalism and social welfare programs. To compound matters, the Left has consistently reverted to predictable refrains in reply to the conservative critique. Conservatives have become so proficient at this rhetorical parrying that they routinely reduce progressives to ideological caricature. This occurs because, instead of posing an alternative set of theses, liberals have found comfort in defending familiar, shopworn ideas.

Thus, the liberal antecedents to conservative rhetoric have not only provided the fuel for the Right, but they have also become a crutch for the Left—one that offers diminishing support. Probably the best indications of the conservative aptitude for this rhetorical game are the differing atmospheres that pervade the respective ideological camps. The Left, once the fount of optimism effused by the likes of Pete Seeger and Hubert Humphrey, evinces a pitiable dejection, while the Right, at one time the refuge of spoilsports like Richard Nixon, produces the spirited orneriness of P.J. O'Rourke and Newt Gingrich. During the 1960s, liberals smirked that there weren't any Republican folksongs; but since the 1980s conservatives seem to be having all the fun.

The liberalism that evolved with the New Deal and the Great Society orbited around three poles: adequacy, equality, and regulation. *Adequacy* was articulated by programs that assured income to those populations marginal to the labor market. Income entitlements were extended to poor workers by creation and elevation of the minimum wage and upon retirement the provision of a minimal pension through Social Security. For those outside the labor market, welfare programs, such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Food Stamps, and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) guaranteed a financial floor. In the half-century following passage of the Social Security Act, non-income supports were offered, such as health care (Medicare and Medicaid), prenatal care (the Women, Infants, and Children Supplemental Nutrition Program), and housing (Section 8). Behind the adequacy thesis was a liberal assumption that providing basic supports for the poor would free them to use opportunities, such as education and work, to prosper.

Equality was a direct response to the social and income stratification of American culture according to class, race, and gender.

The redistributive impulse that at least formally taxed the rich at higher rates in order to provide benefits to workers was advanced by Progressives to ameliorate problems associated with diverging classes. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 extended social and political rights to African Americans whose opportunities were attenuated by de facto segregation. In order to encourage employers to hire and promote minorities and women, Affirmative Action was introduced. In advancing equality, liberals argued that government's assurance of equal political rights should be extended to the economic and social sectors, as well. The ultimate objective was a society in which class, race, and gender, if not eradicated, would no longer circumscribe opportunity for entire subpopulations.

Regulation served to justify governmental intrusion into the economy in the late industrial period. During the Progressive Era, regulation was the instrument of choice to clean up corruption and exploitation in government, the production of food and drugs, commerce and banking, and working conditions for women and children (Jansson, 1993). A more central role for government in markets was sanctioned by Keynesian theory in order to avoid recession. Governmental actions to counter the Depression and defend the nation during the Second World War then the Cold War led Americans to expect federal intervention when America's prosperity and security were threatened. During the post-war era, federal initiatives were authorized in order to keep the nation strong in the event of foreign aggression, among them the G.I. Bill, completion of the inter-state highway system, and an extensive student loan program (Newman, 1993). Much of the liberal activist agenda after 1960s—the Civil Rights Act, the ill-fated Equal Rights Amendment, the Occupational Safety and Health Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act—were justified by a broad interpretation of the regulatory role of the federal government.

Adequacy, equality, and regulation served liberalism well, effectively orienting American social policy for a half-century. The brew was sufficiently potent that even conservative presidents—Eisenhower and Nixon—conceded not only the correctness of liberally-inspired policies but also worked to extend them. By 1980 social program expenditures accounted for more than 57

percent of the federal budget and almost 20 percent of Gross Domestic Product (Stoesz, 1996). In the judgment of most observers, the welfare state had become an institutional fixture in American culture (Marmor, et al., 1990).

The Conservative Critique

The conservative challenge to liberal hegemony in social policy began with a string of policy institutes promoting conservatism as public philosophy. Think tanks, such as the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the Hoover Institution, the Manhattan Institute, among others, collected resentment that had accumulated within the corporate sector, the right wing of the Republican party (as well as some disaffected conservative Democrats), and the grass-roots traditionalist movement and catalyzed a fundamental critique of liberal social policy. This ideological offensive was played-out much in the way Hirschman described.

Conservatives attacked the liberal adequacy thesis by arguing that its consequences were *perverse*. Rather than assure the poor of a safety-net from which they could bounce back into productive activities, welfare insidiously induced dependency, lulling economically marginal families into an underclass from which they could not escape. Charles Murray popularized this thesis in *Losing Ground* which appeared in 1984. Still, Murray was somewhat uncertain about how to remedy the degeneracy he attributed to welfare, so he obliquely presented his solution as "a thought experiment": "scrapping the entire federal welfare and income support structure for working-aged persons, including AFDC, Medicaid, Food Stamps, Unemployment Insurance, Worker's Compensation, subsidized housing, disability, and the rest" (1984, pp. 227–28). However elliptically presented, the suggestion of outright elimination of all welfare was breathtaking. No less astonishing was the relatively weak evidence that Murray offered to substantiate his argument.

This idea that welfare exacerbated poverty led conservative analysts to differentiate a "new" behavioral poverty from the "old" cash poverty (Mead, 1992). While the income programs of the social safety-net might be appropriate for the prudent poor,

the problem of behavioral poverty called for a more strategic response. According to Lawrence Mead (1986), the negative effects of welfare could be corrected by making receipt of benefits conditional on mainstream behavior, particularly work. Thus, welfare-to-work featured prominently in the Family Support Act of 1988; in order to receive AFDC, beneficiaries without exempting circumstances would be required to participate in education, training, or job placement services or lose their benefits. Once having found a job, recipients of AFDC were entitled to "transitional benefits", the receipt of assistance for child care, transportation, and Medicaid for a year to ease the transition to private sector employment (Stoesz & Karger, 1989).

By the early 1990s enforcing reciprocity among welfare recipients had become fashionable among state governors. Wisconsin introduced "learnfare", the requirement that children on AFDC demonstrate regular school attendance or their family would lose benefits. New Jersey promoted family planning by refusing to increase benefits for additional children born after welfare benefits were granted. Several states took President Clinton at his word for his intent to "end welfare as we know it" by introducing a time-limit on receipt of welfare, the termination of benefits being the ultimate form of conditionality. By the time the 104th Congress was prepared to "devolve" welfare to the states in a block grant, some 40 states had already received waivers from the federal government to pilot experiments. State welfare experiments and passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996—aka "welfare reform"—further validated the perversity thesis.

The Right also attacked the liberal equality thesis, contending that social programs were *futile* in the face of unalterable societal forces. Foremost, conservatives alleged that poverty had become more intractable even as public welfare expenditures increased. The more benign expression of the futility thesis portrayed class, race, and gender as "deep" structures that were simply immutable. George Gilder, for example, indicated that the interaction of race, gender, and class were too formidable to be transformed by social programs. Accordingly, his solution was to leave the poor to benefit from "the spur of their own poverty" (1981, p. 118). Brigitte and Peter Berger assumed a more assertive

stance, identifying the professional groups that arose to staff the welfare state as being the true beneficiaries: "intentionally or not, this body of laws (making up, in the aggregate, what we now know as the American welfare state) provided powerful handles for the intervention by professionals in the lives of individual families" (1983, p. 33). So equipped, human service professionals used the programs of the welfare state as instruments to disempower poor, predominantly minority families, in so doing reinforcing social stratification.

These themes blossomed in *The Bell Curve* by Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein (1994). According to Murray and Herrnstein, low intelligence contributed to a range of social pathologies: teen pregnancy, welfare dependence, crime, unemployment, school failure, and family break-up. The reproduction of the low-IQ poor assured the growth of a "cognitive underclass", a subpopulation that is unable to benefit from well-intentioned social programs. Rather than improve the conditions of the underclass, welfare benefits maintained the degenerate poor, assuring the replication of those with low-IQ. The growth of the irremediable underclass eventually increased the hazards for intellectuals in the society, so the "cognitive elite" sought security by walling itself off in gated communities. Yet, despite the hazard presented by the underclass, the cognitive elite has been unable to mount credible responses to the threat posed by the low-IQ poor. The result, contended Herrnstein and Murray, has been an inevitable dumbing-down of American society.

Finally, conservatives contended that excessive regulation promulgated by liberals extended the role of the federal government to the point that American society was in *jeopardy*.¹ This argument evolved most vividly through the "mediating structures project" of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). In the late 1970s, AEI commissioned Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus to prepare an explanation for the nation's ills. The product, *To Empower People* (1977), theorized that the American malaise could be attributed to a pervasive alienation sensed by individuals as "megastructures" increasingly dominate social relations. The disempowering megastructures included big government, the corporate sector, big labor unions, and professional associations. The solution to this condition, Berger and Neuhaus

proposed, was the reinforcement of "mediating structures": the neighborhood, civic associations, the church, and family. Thus, began the Right's infatuation with small-town Americana. Not long thereafter, Michael Novak assumed responsibility for the "mediating structures project" and in *Toward a Theology of the Corporation* (1981) reclassified big business as a mediating structure, leaving as megastructures the institutions most closely associated with liberalism.² According to Novak, the corporation was an essential feature of a three-part system of checks and balances. American culture was a trinity comprised of the economy, the state and a social culture, represented by the corporation, government, and mediating structures, respectively (Stoesz & Karger, 1992, p. 48). The authoritarian impulses of big government must be countered by a protean corporate sector and vibrant mediating structures, Novak contended. In the absence of such correctives, big government threatens civilization itself.

Having identified big government as a cultural hazard, the problem of responding to social need remained, however. The solution was proposed by the Heritage Foundation's Marvin Olasky who suggested the revival of mediating structures extant prior to the New Deal. "The more effective provision of social services will ultimately depend on their return to private and especially to religious institutions," he averred. "Most of our 20th century schemes have failed. It's time to learn from the warm hearts and hard heads of the 19th" (1990, p. 14). By reinvigorating mediating structures, conservatives argued that the jeopardy posed by the social programs of big government could be avoided. Not surprisingly, as welfare reform proposals proliferated in various states, the more conservative governors favored replacing government welfare with voluntary, nonprofit activities, all consistent with mediating structures theory and, of course, the jeopardy thesis.

Proactive Rhetoric

If conservatives have invoked a reactionary rhetoric to such success, is a subsequent, proactive rhetoric conceivable? If so, the rhetoric should meet two criteria. Proactive rhetoric must address flaws in the conservative critique of social programs and do so in a way that avoids the liberal tendency to recite dated theses. The

task is not only to demonstrate the inadequacy of conservative public philosophy, but also to present a vocabulary of motive that resonates with current and projected experience.

As counterpoint to the perversity thesis (programs exacerbate poverty), a *mobility* thesis should be presented as a way to enhance prosperity. Conservative consequences of the perversity thesis—making receipt of welfare conditional on specific behaviors—is appealing rhetorically, but in practice it is at best ambiguous. Most research on welfare-to-work programs shows that they not only fail to vault many people into economic independence, but they also fail to save government substantial amounts in welfare expenditures (Stoesz, 1997). Research by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) reveals that the typical welfare-to-work program increases participants' income, but only by several hundred dollars annually, hardly enough to make them self-sufficient. Moreover, savings to welfare departments are modest. Because of the initial investment needed to mount a welfare-to-work program, it often takes years for agencies to recover that initial outlay and achieve net savings (Gueron & Pauly, 1991). Many welfare-to-work enthusiasts regard the Riverside, California program as a model, yet the results there are far from sanguine: "Even the Riverside program, considered to be the most successful welfare-to-work program evaluated to date, does not promise lasting results. Three years after entering the program, only 23 percent of the participants were still employed and off AFDC," observed Randall Eberts of the Upjohn Institute for Employment Research. "Furthermore, the earnings do little to lift welfare recipients out of poverty. In California overall, only 20 percent of the participants had annual incomes above the poverty rate after three years" (1995, p. 4).

If welfare-to-work disappoints, the implications of other forms of conditionality of welfare are at least as problematic. Learnfare—the requirement that AFDC children attend school regularly or their families risk benefit reductions—requires a "bean-counting" capability that would be a bonanza to the stereotypical government bureaucrat. An evaluation of Milwaukee's experience with Learnfare concluded that the program failed to produce the outcomes promised by proponents (Quinn & Magill, 1994). But, the imposition of time limits is most troublesome.

Findings of the Institute for Women's Policy Research reveal that over 40 percent of AFDC mothers are either peripherally attached to the labor market, augmenting welfare with wages, or they drift in and out of welfare depending on the availability of work (Spalter-Roth, et al., 1995). LaDonna Pavetti (1995) of the Urban Institute reports that 56 percent of women leave welfare by the end of the first year, and 70 percent leave by the end of two years; however, 45 percent return to public assistance before the end of the first year off welfare, and 57 percent return by the end of two years. The imposition of time limits would put an abrupt halt to the parallel and cyclical relationship between low wages and welfare. Without public assistance many poor mothers would simply be unable to support their families (Edin & Lein, 1997).

A mobility thesis would focus attention on the aspirations of the poor and highlight their climb up the socio-economic ladder. Perhaps the best evidence of this comes from immigration research which indicates that immigrants have labor force participation rates that eclipse those of native residents (Borjas, 1990). Not only do they create more jobs than they take, but immigrants also show a net contribution to the tax base (Simon, 1989; Fix & Passel, 1994). A conceptual illustration of the mobility thesis is the Individual Development Account (IDA) proposal fielded by Michael Sherraden (1991). Noting that most welfare benefits focus on income maintenance, but that most poor families become prosperous by accruing assets, Sherraden suggests IDAs to promote upward mobility of the poor. IDAs are tax-exempt accounts providing they are spent on completing an education, buying a home, establishing a business, or supplementing a pension. An individual's contribution to an account would be matched by an external source, such as philanthropy or government, according to the income of the account holder (Edwards & Sherraden, 1994). The Center for Enterprise Development has undertaken an \$15 million demonstration of IDAs at 13 sites across the nation as the "Downpayment on the American Dream" project. Microcredit, sometimes called microenterprise, is another example of a mobility accelerating program.

An answer to the futility thesis (programs are useless) would be the *empowerment* of the poor. Interestingly, conservatives have been able to trump liberals with the futility thesis because of

the Left's persistent focus on the evils of *laissez faire*: because capitalism skews the distribution of resources and opportunities, the victims should be provided with necessities by government outside of the market. This has justified the erection of public monopolies to serve the poor, bureaucracies that segregate the poor economically and socially from the mainstream. One of the great ironies of contemporary welfare has been the genius with which some "bleeding-heart" conservatives have diverged from the party line and exploited this opening. Noting welfare mother Kimi Gray's courage in organizing neighbors in a District of Columbia housing project in order to expel drug users, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Jack Kemp, initiated a program through which tenants could buy their housing units. Secretary of Education William Bennett endorsed the school choice initiative that had been introduced to the Wisconsin legislature by former welfare recipient "Polly" Williams. In the early 1990s, Kemp and Williams teamed up to launch a conservative policy institute, Empower America.

Empowering the poor requires a deconstruction of the welfare bureaucracy while offering service recipients choice of providers. The school choice debate has generated the charter school concept, yet a comparable initiative in welfare is yet to be clearly articulated. How might empowerment be applied to welfare? Typically, welfare departments consist of two divisions: income maintenance (dispensing public assistance, Food Stamp, Supplemental Security Income benefits) and social services (providing foster care, adoption, day care, and home help services). Income maintenance could be capitated and put out to bid to private (commercial or nonprofit) financial institutions that would function as Community Development Banks (CDBs). Services offered by CDBs would include account management (including checking, savings, and the use of smart cards for access of benefits from Automatic Teller Machines and Food Stamps automatically deducted at check-out), tax preparation to optimize refunds from the Earned Income Tax Credit, counseling in use of training and education benefits, and long-range financial planning. Utilizing direct deposit, CDBs would have on reserve substantial sums that could be used for community development projects, such as microenterprise (Solomon, 1991). Members could enroll in a CDB

of their choice. Social services could be deconstructed through use of social service vouchers. Once eligible, consumers could choose among a roster of approved providers, selecting one using state-of-art technology, such as interactive television, and providing evaluations at the end of service that would be used to rate provider performance (Stoesz, 1992).

The *restructuring* of industrial bureaucracies rebuts the jeopardy thesis (policy subverts previous achievements). The flattening of corporate bureaucracies has proceeded with a vengeance during the past decade. Firms such as IBM, Sears, and General Motors, have laid off tens of thousands of employees in order to maximize the use of technology, shed unnecessary workers, while diverting savings to stockholders through profits and bonuses to executives via excessive compensation packages (Sloan, 1996). Within government, restructuring was promoted by David Osborne (1988) who investigated how governors were adjusting to increasing demand for services yet diminishing federal assistance to the states. Later Osborne teamed up with Ted Gaebler (1992) to produce *Reinventing Government*, a book that quickly captured the attention of public administrators. Osborne then consulted with Vice-President Al Gore (1993) on the National Performance Review, a federal house-cleaning initiative that promised to eliminate 252,000 federal employees at an alleged savings of \$108 billion. Thus, the industrial era edifices of the corporate and governmental sectors appear headed to the bureaucratic rendering plant.

Within this broad context of organizational transformation, experimentation in welfare provision has proceeded in the form of state welfare reform demonstrations. As noted above, most state experimentation in welfare reform is aimed at countering the perversity thesis, not restructuring welfare *per se*. For that very reason, state welfare reforms that reflect a preoccupation with making receipt of welfare conditional on normative behavior require *further* elaboration of the welfare bureaucracy. In a delectable irony that liberals might be quick to point out, such social engineering of the poor contradicts conservative precepts since it amplifies the functions and costs of government. Conservatively-inspired welfare reform thus generates a perversity of its own by expanding the public welfare apparatus.

Logically, devolution of welfare from the federal government to the states could achieve restructuring, providing governors were willing to dismantle their public welfare bureaucracies. To date few have been willing to do so for fear of angering state employee organizations and client advocacy groups. Such entropy notwithstanding, an exemplary illustration of restructuring is the Savannah-Chatham (Georgia) Youth Futures Authority (YFA). Since 1987, YFA has collapsed several categorical welfare programs, used pooled revenues to deploy "family advocates", generated a common eligibility form, and developed a paperless, electronic record system. Services are provided in a poor neighborhood and delivered by "family advocates", case managers who are assigned two per census tract and manage no more than 25 cases each. Electronic record keeping facilitates correlating case experience with social indicators so that each year YFA can determine service outcomes. While not all indicators show consistent improvement, several do, including reduction in the teen birthrate, the number of children who are behind grade in school, and the number of founded cases of child abuse (*Five year report*, 1994). In dispelling the "big brother" image of federal social programs, the YFA illustrates how restructuring can refute the jeopardy thesis.

Proactive Rhetoric

The theses associated with liberalism (adequacy, equality, regulation), conservatism (perversity, futility, jeopardy), and their sequel (mobility, empowerment, restructuring) are depicted in Chart 1. This scheme of rhetorical transitions suggests that liberalism defined domestic policy roughly from 1935 to 1980, and that conservatism served a similar function from 1980 until sometime early in the next century. Until they abandon their antiquated rhetoric, liberals will continue to be vulnerable to conservative barrages directed at the welfare state, such as Newt Gingrich's, whose antipathy for federal social programs has permeated the Republican party: "The decay of the welfare state . . . has reduced citizens to clients, subordinated them to bureaucrats and subjected them to rules that are anti-work, anti-opportunity and anti-property. The welfare state must be replaced, not reformed"

Chart 1

Rhetoric and Ideology

<i>Orientation to</i>	<i>Liberalism</i>	<i>Conservatism</i>	<i>Proactive Rhetoric</i>
Program outcomes:	Adequacy	Perversity	Mobility
Policy objectives:	Equality	Futility	Empowerment
Government policy:	Regulation	Jeopardy	Restructuring

(1995). Liberals would be wise to recognize that an increasing number of Democrats hold reservations about governmental social programs. Ted Kennedy, speaking before the Women’s National Democratic Club as early as 1988, had said, “We now stand between two Americas, the one we have known and the one toward which we are heading. The New Deal will live in American history forever as a supreme example of government responsiveness to the times. But it is no answer to the problems of today” (Broder, 1988). In the shadow of the 1994 Republican electoral triumph, “new” Democrat Al From had been more blunt: “The New Deal Era is over. It was a grand and glorious era for Democrats, but it is over. The nails are in the coffin of New Deal liberalism, and it is dead and buried. It was a great ideology while it lasted—it was the ideology that built the middle class of America—but the policies that built the middle class can no longer earn their support. And we have lost them” (Kelly, 1994). Any fantasies about President Clinton’s liberal tendencies disappeared with his signing the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, ending a 60-year social entitlement for poor families.

That liberals will respond effectively to their rout at the rhetoric of conservatives cannot be predicted with confidence. Many continue to harbor the illusion that the current reversal in public sentiment is transitory; given time, Americans will revert to their modern liberal sensibilities. The “pendulum theory” of ideological transformation has been proposed with greatest gravity by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (1986) who noted that conservatism and liberalism oscillated in 30-year cycles. From the 1935 Social Security Act to the 1965 Great Society legislation, Schlesinger

extrapolated that the next expansion in social programs would occur after the election of an unambiguously liberal president around 1995. Instead of a resurgence of liberalism, America witnessed the (re)election of Bill Clinton who worked in consort with a conservative Congress to repeal the federal social entitlement for poor families.

As conservatives of a generation ago were confronted with disarray after the failed Goldwater presidential candidacy, so liberals today must deal with the lack of vigor inspired by their rhetoric. Certainly, socio-economic circumstance provides ample material for fashioning a new and compelling lexicon: income disparities between the rich and poor are at all-time highs; hyper-segregation intensifies in older cities; the underclass metastasizes; social programs constrict. In light of deteriorating conditions, the liberal reflex has not been to entertain a "proactive rhetoric", however, but instead to indulge in shibboleths of the past. While this may be psychologically reassuring for those who can afford to so humor themselves, it offers little succor for the millions of Americans who have been segregated from the mainstream.

Notes

1. Hirschman suggested that conservatives opposed progressive initiatives out of a fear that they would subvert earlier achievements—already secured civil and political rights. I would argue that the issue is more profound; that conservatives fear that nothing less than civilization is at stake.
2. Cleverly, Novak pulls off this sleight-of-hand in a footnote on page 5.

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